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Religious Fundamentalism and the Secular Credentials in India, a Critical Analysis

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Abstract: India as a most popular secular democracy in the world is subjected to intense debate and discussion, especially in the present context of growing religious extremism and zealotry in the country. Fundamentalism and jingoism in any religion propagate animosity among its population and chaos in the socio-political structures of the country. In India, the peril of politics-religion nexus jeopardizes the secular credentials of the state and unmasks the myth of Indian secularism which virtually exudes from an illusion of peaceful co-existence of different religions and freedom of faith. The indivisible linkage between politics and religion in India bolster religious fundamentalism of certain sections which ravage the foundation of modern secularism. Thus the Indian secularism in modern times stands different from what the constitutional founding members of modern India were envisioning of. This paper would critically analyze the impact of religious fundamentalism on India's social and political structures along with its changing equations with the estate machineries in the post-independence era. It would also seek to unearth certain possible propositions to make Indian secularism a reality rather than a myth.

Key Words: Secularism, Religion, Politics, State, Radicalism.

I. Introduction

The idea Secularism has been contemplated as one of the most desirable ideals for a robust democratic political system and a prerequisite for a stable social and economic machinery of a modern state system. The approaches and methods of deciphering the concept of secularism conspicuously varied majorly on the basis of differences in cultural constructions in various parts of the world. The western conception of secularism and the orient version of the concept are different from each other. The socio political history, cultural moorings and the philosophical orientation of scholars and writers ultimately decide the nature of secularism prevail in a particular region or a country. The idea secularism in India in modern times has been widely debated by various scholars, academicians, politicians and public intellectuals. The process of redefining the secular ideals and the adoption of western secularism into the Indian context invited much debates and discussions in the academic discourse. Secularism in India is unique due to its heterogeneous population who engaged with

different religious and cultural orientations within a single large framework of nationhood. Like any other states or society, the major elements pertinent to the ideal of secularism in Indian context are state and religion. The mechanism of operation and interaction between these two critical factors majorly define the Indian secularism and make different from those exist in western societies.

The growth and evolution of Indian secularism had gone major transformational changes since its independence. The essence and implications of Indian secularism in present days are completely different from what the constitutional architects and political leaders of that time envisioned of. The changing dynamics of societal relations and the power structures over the period influenced the secular credentials in India. The political establishments and their rule in the parliamentary democratic set up far more determined the nature of Indian secularism with their various social and political agendas. The emergence of political parties and their priorities with the agenda of the promotion and expansion of religion over the development and progress of the country became a major turning point in the history of secularism in the post-independent India. The overt acceptance and approval of one religion over the other religions in a diverse country in India by the newly emerged political establishments have been perceived by some as a threat to the secular foundations of modern India. The association of religion and politics has increased tremendously which is reflected in the recent trends of electoral politics in India. There is a growing acceptance of religion-politics nexus among the masses which give legitimacy to the political establishments at the power with their religious agendas. In this context, an important question arises whether the newly accepted religion-politics nexus would jeopardize the secular credentials in India or not. It is also important in this context to check whether this nexus bolstered the growth of religious fundamentalism in society and examine its ramifications on social political structures in India and its secular foundations.



II. Decoding Secularism vs. Fundamentalism

The idea of secularism and fundamentalism are two opposite poles where a converging point is almost impossible as both have many contradicting connotations with divergent views. The existence of secularism would constantly be under threat if any form of fundamentalism creeps into the public domain even though the source of origin and development of both have been happened in different context and time. The origin of fundamentalism can be traced back to early 20th century when the term 'fundamentals' was used in a vogue sense. In 1920, a set of 12 booklets were published by a Christian Group under the title 'Fundamentals' (Thomas, 1994). The main purpose behind the publication of those books was to oppose the any form critical approach to their holy text Bible as it would be destruct the major essence of their faith. This paved the way for a new beginning of clash between two major discourses which is tradition or fundamentalism versus Modernism and Faith versus Reason. Thus Fundamentalism as a movement started in United States to reaffirm certain tenets of their religious tradition (Gharekhan, The Indian Express).

The meaning and nature of Fundamentalism and fundamentals have evolved over the period and taken different form in different societies. In the present day context, the term fundamentals mainly indicates those sections of people who seek to use religion as an instrument to perpetuate extremism and unleash violence against the followers of other religions. Strict adherence to religious rules, blind faith and its usage to establish a homogenous society based on their particular religion are some of the important traits of religious fundamentalism in general. However, there are some different versions of the definition of religious fundamentalism. Some argue that fundamentalists are those who believe in the basic principles of religion without waging a war against any other faiths. Many of the religion profess love, affection, kindness, tolerance as their fundamental principles. Hence, those who believe in these ideals can also be called as fundamentals. Those people who believe in these fundamental religious principles cannot be called as religious fundamentalists (Gharekhan, The Indian Express). But in a very common and popular perspective, religious fundamentals are those who wage war against the humanity in the name of religion. It is important to note the difference between orthodoxy and fundamentalism. Orthodoxy refers to rigidity and strict adherence to tradition while the latter is defined by its interpretations of tradition for some political or other purposes. Some argue that the

rationality and logic find no place in religious fundamentalism in which everything is decided and dictated solely by religion (Word Atlas). Schaefer and Lamm (1992) define fundamentalism as an acceptance of religious doctrines along with the application of historical and religious belief to today's world (Schaefer and Lamm, 1992).

The term secularism on the other hand originated in Europe which prescribed the ethical behavior of a political organization to supersede violence and irrationality which is inherent in some religious expressions. It predominately argued the separation of church and the State. At an individual level, it prescribes the separation of public and private domains of activities. However the resurgence of religion across the globe in the form of Hindu nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism challenged the ideals of secularism. Ashis Nandy in a conference in 2002¹ expressed his opinion that 'secularism is dead' (Tejani, 2016).

III. Defining Secularism in the Indian Context

The emergence of secularism in India initially revolved around the narratives of freedom struggle. The post independent India based on a modern constitutional structure which provided the freedom of religion to its citizens. The growth and evolutions of secularism in India had gone through several transformational stages. The major two turning points in the history of Indian secularism were Mandal Commission Report² and the Case of Shah Bano³. The recommendation of Mandal commission led to the self-immolation of some Brahman students in Delhi. Shah Bano case was used as a political tool by the Rajiv Gandhi government for the political interests as it created a huge hue and cry among the conservative religious leaders of the Muslim community (Tejani, 2016). The rise of BJP after the Mandal upheavals and the 1989 elections in which BJP could win seats in Lok Sabha marked the emergence of Hindutva nationalism and the bond between politics and religion in power structures got more strengthened.

1 'Siting Secularism' conference, Oberlin, Ohio, 2002.

2 Mandal Commission submitted its report in 1989 which recommended an increase in the reservation in education and employment for the backward class people.

3 The case in which Supreme Court ordered for maintenance payments to Shah Bano who was a Muslim woman and was divorced by her husband. The ruling of the Supreme Court came in 1989.



BJP leader Advani's chariot voyage⁴ and the demolition of Babri masjid⁵ posed a major threat to the secular foundations of India and shocked the liberal streams of thought in India. The attack on Christian communities and churches, reconversion of Christians and Muslims, killings of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002⁶ challenged the secular credentials of the state authorities in India.

The debate of secularism in India majorly focused on the confrontation between two narratives, secularism vs. communalism and religion vs. modernity. Scholars and intellectuals like Ashis Nandy, Amartya Sen, T N Madan, and Rajeev Bhargava have defined and described Indian secularism in their own academic fervor which sometimes come at many loggerheads and sometimes merged into one block. According to Rajeev Bhargava, the debate on Indian secularism goes through four different strands (Bhargava, 1998). Firstly the liberal lefts are of the opinion that religion and politics are two different realms and the rise of the Hindutva ideology in the 1980s indicates the failure of a modern secular state. The second strand has been majorly articulated by T N Madan and Ashis Nandy who are of the opinion that the idea of secularism is not indigenous to India and hence it is not appropriate for the Indian conditions. Third strand is the narrative of the founders of Hindu nation who say that the recognition of minorities is merely an indication of pseudo-secularism. The fourth strand is the intellectual reflections put forward by Rajeev Bhargava himself where he is of the opinion that the deliberation on secularism in India has to go beyond the opposition with religion (Bhargava, 1998). Partha Chatterjee, Neera Chandhoke and Aditya Nigam are the other prominent intellectuals who discussed Indian secularism at a longer stretch. Partha Chatterjee argued for an autonomous forum to represent the interest of the religious minorities (Chatterjee, 1994). Neera Chandhoke is of the opinion that secularism in

India is not all about finding a place for religion but to accommodate the rights of minorities and to ensure equality for religious communities (Chandhoke, 1999). Aditya Nigam argues against the 'totalizing nature of normative secularism' (Nigam, 2006).

IV. The Menace of Religious Fundamentalism in India

During early period, the term fundamentalism was completely associated with Christianity. It has become associated with Hinduism and popular in India especially after the most controversial Babri Masjid Demolition. These new trend of associating fundamentalism with different other faiths is known as resurgent fundamentalism (Mondal, 2016). The resurgent fundamentalism in India ultimately led to the emergence of a strong politics-religion nexus. The encroachment of religious fundamentalism into the public realm caused the intertwining of religion and politics in India. Religious fundamentalism massively affected the political process in the country. It intentionally or unintentionally generated conservative religious and political movements along with the dissemination of blind faith in nationalism (Mondal, 2016). India also witnessed Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian fundamentalism in varying degrees. The Khalistan Movement⁷ culminated in the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is a proof for Sikh fundamentalism in India (World Atlas). Christian fundamentalism was at the front in 2012 when a rationalist thinker Sanal Edamaruku tried to convince that the drops of water at the base of a crucifix is not a miraculous phenomenon rather it is a leakage of a drainage pipe. The conservative Christian groups went against him and at the end he fled to Finland (M N and Shashank, 2015).

Scott (1994) is of the opinion that coercion is one of the components of present day religious fundamentalism in India. This can be proved by taking the examples of people who never approved the politics of 'Rathayatra' had to give consent to build a Ram temple at Ayodhya as their religious identity was invoked and no choice was left other than supporting the initiative (Scott, 1994). Fundamentalisms in India reject modernism and secularism while using the modern knowledge and technology. It is communal in character and it is being used as a tool for political mobilization (Scott, 1994). Religious Fundamentalism, whether it's the Sikh, Islam, Buddhist, Christian or Hindu

4 L.K. Advani, former president of BJP dressed himself as God Ram and converted a vehicle in the form of a chariot and travelled across the country in the run up to the 1989 elections.

5 On 6 December 1992, a large number of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) demolished the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by claiming that it earlier was a site of a Ram temple.

6 In February and March 2002, large number of Muslim population was murdered and evicted from their homeland in Gujarat as a revenge for burning a train having Hindus who were returning from Ayodhya.

7 A sikh fundamentalist movement demanding a separate independent state for Sikhs.



fundamentalism, can be seen in India at various levels. It work both at an public and intellectual level. There could be two reasons why Hindu fundamentalism is more apparent in India. Firstly Hindu religion is the dominant religion with a majority population practicing Hindu rituals and traditions. Secondly, the presence of a national party in power with a conspicuous agenda of Hindu nationalism and Hindutva make the Hindu fundamentalism more apparent and strong in both private and public domains. Even though, any kind of fundamentalism is a threat to the social political structure of a country, the association of it with the administrative structures make it more detrimental for both people and the country.

V. The Nexus between State and Religion in India

The emergence of Bharatiya Janata Party in Indian political spectrum as a strong political force clearly exposes the link between the state machinery and the Hindu religion in India. A majority of the Hindu nationalists in India want to establish Hinduism as the state religion. Gujarat pogrom and the alleged involvement of the state in support of the perpetrators of violence is a best example of obnoxious nexus between state and religion in India (Bhargava, 2012). It is important to note that the nexus between state and religion is not just confined to a single political party. There are many examples where the interface between the state and religion happened at different levels. Even the congress party which claims as a secular party in India has an interaction with the religion and various religious establishments. Rajiv Gandhi's pro-Muslim stance marked the erosion of secular face of congress. Indira Gandhi also tried to exploit the religious sentiments for her political gains. She granted an autonomous status to Aligarh Muslim University to retain her political interests. She also made many visits to temple. Thus the "political Culture of the Congress was on the same wavelength as the Hindu culture" (Jaffrelot, 2011).

Bharatiya Janata Party has a close alliance with RSS which carries a main agenda of Hindu Rashtra. Despite the ups and down in the relationship between RSS and BJP, a strong link exists between the two. Immediately after the 1999 elections, many of the appointments of those persons were made who were close to the Sangh Parivar. The appointments of the heads of Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR), Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) have been made in this way

(Jaffrelot, 2011). The Sangh Parivar⁸ always wanted BJP to be adhered to the core ideology of Hindutva which can pose a serious challenge t the secular credentials of the country. Some scholars like Mitra even argues that "the deliberation over desecularisng the state essentially argues for bringing religion back by drawing attention to the modern state's inability to engage in a dialogue with its society on this issue (Mitra, 1991).

VI. Implications of State's Engagement with Religious Fundamentalism in India

The implications of state-religion nexus are huge in India. The religious fundamentalists with the support of state power prevent the secularization of society in every possible means. The inclusion and exclusion of certain chapters and reshuffling of curriculum in state educational institutions is a major implication of linkage between state and religion (Mondal, 2016).

The attacks on different religious sections immediately after the general election of 2014 explains the link between the state support and the confidence of religious fundamentalists and extreme nationalists to implement their agenda. The attacks on Christians and Muslims were orchestrated by an extremist organization called Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh⁹ which is a major stake holder of Bharatiya Janata Party¹⁰ that is in power at centre after 2014 general election in India. The elected Prime Minister of India is a lifelong member of RSS (Al Jazeera, 2015). The support given by the state machinery to those extremist organizations created chaos in Indian society. Ghar wapsi Programme by which Muslims are forced to convert to Hinduism is a testimony to it. The murder of Muslims for allegedly eating beef created popular discontent among the people. Mohammed Akhlaq was lynched by a Hindu mob for allegedly consuming beef and his son was beaten up (Al Jazeera, 2015). The over importance given to cows by invoking Hindu religious belief also crested panic among the people. The consent of state machineries to these acts and the inaction

⁸ Refers to the family of Hindu Nationalist organizations which include RSS and many other affiliated organizations.

⁹ A Hindu nationalist paramilitary organization which was founded in 1925 with its headquarters at Nagpur.

¹⁰ A right wing party came into existence in 1980 with the agenda of Hindu nationalism and has a close ideological link with Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh.



from the state part exposes the link between state and religion in India.

Another major implication of state involvement with the religious fundamentalist groups is the unbridled attack on the critical thinking and thinkers. The life of liberal activists comes under major threat. Kalburgi, a major critique of Hindu practice of idol worship and a rational thinker was murdered by some extreme religious groups. People like Bhagwan get death threats when they attack and criticize the irrational and illogical elements in a belief system. Dabholkar, who campaigned for ant-superstition bill, was murdered in Pune. Following to this Pansare was killed for exposing the image of Shivaji as one who was surrounded by Hindu conservatives M N and Shashank, (2015).

VII. The Way Forward

There is no doubt that the extreme religious fundamentalism causes misery and hatred among the people. Religious fundamentalism creates parochialism and paranoia in the society. It shuts the doors to modern ideas and scientific principles. The association with state and religion lead to the extreme danger of Jingoism and parochialism. It makes religious fundamentalism more detrimental. Hence it is important to keep the two domains separate from one another. In the Indian context

especially where the religious and cultural traditions are diverse, the separation of state from religion is necessary. The domination of one religion over the other with the state support questions the secular credentials of the state. There should be some efforts from the people who run the political parties and various other organizations to keep away their religious agenda from the public domains. Rather than focusing on the promotion of one particular religion, there need to be some serious and genuine efforts from them to keep the agenda of development for all irrespective of what religion one believes in. People of the country also need to take some responsibility to stop the political parties with religious fundamentalist ideas from coming to power. They also need to develop a culture of pluralist society which accepts the existence of diverse belief in the society while accepting the separation of state from religion. Thus, to protect the secular credentials of state, there must be a complete alienation of religion from the state functionaries and the responsibility need to be shared by both people and government functionaries. The secular credentials of a country need to be maintained for a successful pluralist society and a robust liberal democracy.

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